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Q&A | Bobby R. Inman

Assessing Government's Approach to Intelligence

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WASHINGTON, July 4 — Adm. Bobby R. Inman startled Washington in April when he announced his intention to resign as the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. He said he wanted to go into private business, but associates asserted that the real reasons for his departure were policy differences with the Reagan Administration and mounting frustration over dealing with the White House National Security Council staff. His retirement from the Government and the Navy complete, Mr. Inman sat down last week to discuss intelligence issues.

Q. Is the Reagan Administration using intelligence information as a neutral basis for foreign policy formulation, or, as some critics have charged, is it twisting intelligence data to justify policies?

A. It's been very rare in my experience when an Administration makes an effort to deliberately twist the intelligence to support policy, but there have been efforts over the years to force us to say more than the intelligence professionals believe is safe in terms of protecting sources and methods. I believed we found the proper balance earlier this year on the issue of Cuban and Soviet involvement in Central America. The debate was not with the intelligence but with the policy. I don't believe that the Cuban and Soviet threats were being exaggerated. For years we had a minimal effort dedicated to Central America and did not detect in a timely way the commencement of the training of prospective guerrillas in Cuba. We were slow to recognize the breadth of insurgencies that we were going to face. When we finally accumulated a large body of raw data, and understood the scope of Cuban activity clearly undertaken with full Soviet support, there was a tendency to react with shock. That may well have come across as overreaction. The language used to describe Cuban activity may have been a little more shrill than it would have been had we detected the activity from the outset.

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Q. How has the Reagan Administration changed priorities in intelligence collection and analysis?

A. Early in the Reagan Administration, increased emphasis was placed on gaining a knowledge of events in Central America and the Caribbean, the causes of terrorism and the problem of the transfer of American technology to the Soviets and Communist bloc. Over a longer period of time, there's been a focus on improving knowledge across the third world.

Q. Has the Reagan Administration placed a greater reliance on the use of covert operations than recent administrations?

A. I know of no way that I can talk sensibily in public about specific covert operations. By their nature, there is nothing unclassified about them. I believe historians would agree that every administration ultimately turns to the use of covert operations when they become frustrated about the lack of success with diplomatic initiatives and are unwilling to use military force. Some may begin by being more eager than others. I wouldn't care to characterize any of the administrations I've watched. In the long years of drawing down intelligence capabilities, we almost completely dismantled the nation's capacity to conduct covert operations. The impression that we're running around the world conducting covert operations is plain false. I would add that concern about the extent of covert operations is not just found in Congress. It's also found in substantial depth among intelligence professionals. They are overwhelmingly concerned about the quality of this country's foreign intelligence, and they worry that covert operations, especially when they are exposed and criticized, impact adversely on the more important job of foreign intelligence collection and analysis.

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Q. When the Carter Administration negotiated the second strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union, opponents said the United States lacked the ability to verify such agreements. Is that true?

A. We have tried over the last decade to improve the nation's ability to verify arms control treaties. There was valid criticism in Congress that the resulting capability was thin. The requirements for verification with regard to the SALT I and SALT II treaties were substantial but not overwhelming. A more complex treaty will place substantial additional burdens on verification. There are several ways to deal with that. There are, for instance, forms of on-site inspection that would increase verification capabilities, but if you insist on absolute certainty, if you insist on the capacity to detect every violation, you'll never have an arms control process. You have to take some risks. The key is being confident that you will detect any serious cheating.

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Q. What is the state of United States intelligence capabilities?

A. The United States intelligence community, as currently structured and manned, is marginally capable to deal with the world of the late 1980's and 90's. That judgment is shaped by my view that this country's primary problems in that period will be found in the competition for raw materials, natural resources, and markets in an unstable world with the potential for minor conflicts that could escalate in areas where we now have little or no intelligence effort. I do not believe we can do less than we are doing against our principal adversaries, and there are areas where that effort isn't as good as it should be, specifically intelligence on economic and political developments in the Soviet Union. The major strengths of our system involve military matters. Our major weaknesses include a minimal effort both in collection and analysis about many of the non-Communist countries. We lack the encyclopedic effort that will let us understand trends before we get to the level of a crisis.

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Q. Over recent decades, there has been an increasing reliance on electronic and other technical means of collecting intelligence. Has the resulting neglect of human sources damaged overall collection capabilities and quality?

A. A myth has grown up from statements of some officials that we are too dependent on technical collection. There was a period of time when decision makers believed that satellite photography was going to answer all our needs. We're all a little wiser now. No analyst should be left dependent on a single means of acquiring intelligence. Human collection runs the risk of relying on someone who wants to mislead you. Technical collection may leave you without access to cer-

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